[The Collins Family]

No. 1

SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: THE COLLINS FAMILY.

Date of First Writing January 2, 1939

Name of Persons Interviewed Jules Collins and son, Jim (Colored)

Street Address 62 Collins street Fairmont, S. C.

Occupation Mill Worker (picker room)

Name of Writer Ruth D. Henderson

Name of Reviser District Office THE COLLINS FAMILY.

Jules Collins lives in one of the little four-room “negro houses” provided for the colored help of the Fairmont Mill. Fragments of deep red paint still cling, after twenty years or more, to this little cottage which stands on a high knoll which affords a grand view of Middle Tyger River. The few colored people employed by the mill company are segregated, and dwell on this elevated locality.

Jules, his son Jim, Jim's wife and her small son are the only other occupants of the house. The walls of the unpainted and misty front room are almost covered with a variety of things - a battered guitar, a toy airplane, calendars dating several years back old pictures of the

departed, receipts for everything from cow feed to payments on the little table radio, a general collection C. 10. S. C. Box. 2.

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of old coats and hats, and numerous other smaller articles. Every crack in the floor is visible through the worn linoleum rug which covers the middle part of the room, and the mud from the red hills of the village has supplied a coating of dirt which has been ground into the floor around the edges of the carpet. Jules and his family do much of their “biling” during the winter months on a small laundry heater which occupies space before the fire-place. The fireplace is enclosed with a piece of tin through which an opening admits the stovepipe. A “passel” of firewood, coal, and kindling is piled up on the hearth, and several buckets of ashes and pots are scattered around under the stove.

The only piece of modern furniture in the room is the radio. An old phonograph, the kind used about twenty years ago, sits on one corner of an antiquated washstand; old books and papers fill the rest of the space on it. A trunk and an old sewing machine, too, hold enough old clothes and newspapers to reach half-way up to the web-covered ceiling. Other furnishings of the room consist of two double beds and a few straight chairs. A door on one side of the room permits a partial view of the kitchen. Through its opening can be seen a dining table, and on old lop-sided safe, the panels of which are made of perforated tin. The gay colored table cloth had much the same appearance as the mantle of a Gypsy fortune teller. Various colored tumblers and plates also adorned the table.

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“Uncle” Jules smiles wanly in his ramshackled dwelling and constantly repeats his philosophy in these words: “You know you has to de bes' you can.” His features are typically African. He is short, black, and moon-faced with a stubby beard that curls on the ends. His hair is of the same color and texture as his beard. When he smiles he shows his only teeth, and as he says, “one pints no'th and t'other so'th”, but he forgets to add that he would have to be looking in a westerly direction.

Library of Congress

Business recently occasioned my paying Jules a visit. A smile passed over his face when I walked in, and he pushed his chair back to a more comfortable position, in readiness to hear what he anticipated as glad news. His appearance represented a picture of sheer poverty. No place could be seen on his tattered overalls that had not been patched and repatched. Only a few shreds of cloth fell from the collar of what was once a shirt to the bosom of his overalls. Not a single button could be seen on his garments, but a safety pin dangled here and there from every other button hole. He pushed aside his home-made cap and scratched his gray head.

“Well, Miss,” he said, “'cose I ain't disappointed, but I sho' thought you wuz one dem women frum de gov'ment offices. You looks just like Miss —-, can't call her name now, but I bet you know who she is. Yes, I put in fer my pension last March 8, but I ain't ev'r hyard a word yet. I thought when I seed you 4 coming dey wuz sending at last to 'vestigate me. Dem, women take me in a little room and ax me all de questions dey can think of; den dey say somebody would be sent out to 'vestigate. I ax'em if dere's anything else dey want to know, and dey 'low t'warn't nothing else; but dat's de last I ever hyard frum it.

“Oh yessum, I'se old enough to get de pension, all right. I'se been gwine on sixty-five ever since I give it to 'em down dere last March. We runn'd up my age and found dat I wuz bawn 'bout time de war wuz over —- when dey freed de slaves, you know. I sont by Mr. Gaston and told him to ax 'em if dey had any pleas aginst me. I knows too much to be sassy — don't git no whar dat way. Dey jest say dat dere's nothin' wrong, and dat's all I know to dis day. You know you jest has to do de bes' you can and dat's all.

“I don't 'member nothin' of slavery time, fer dat's 'bout the time I wuz bawn, but 'cose I'se hyard mammy and pappy talk 'bout de war sometimes. I wuz one of de little “freedmen”. My mammy wuz a slave of old Gen'al Miller dat lived down at Moore's. My pappy, he belonged to Mrs. Van Dyke, but he changed his name to Collins - dat's wuz his pa's name

- atter he wuz a free man. Some spell it wid a 'g', and den some spell it jest like Collins, Bee Hive. Don't make no diff'uns.

“My mammy and pappy got married bofo' thy wuz set free. I'se hyard talked how dey married back den; some say dat dey jumped over brooms and things like dat, but hit wuz all changed time I got big enough to get married. Mammy said de slaves wuz treated 5 purty good and dey had plenty to eat, but dey had to work mighty hard. When I wuz a little chap, I used to go to do Nazareth Church with my mammy holding my hand. I'se 'members dat right good. De colored folks all [set?] in a corner to demselves. Mr. [Reid?] wuz de fust man I ever hyard preach. He preached dar at Nazareth fer a long time. I knowed his son well. His name Mr. Whit, and he's one of dem men dat measures off land — surveyors, dat's it.

“De slaves worked 'round de house fer a while atter dey's sot free. I used to be one of de little house-boys fer Mr. Joel Miller. Atter I got older dey sont me down in de lowlands to make hit de bes' I'se could. 'Cose, de rest of 'em had to git out too. Dey had to furnish everything and de land; and de slaves, or dem dat had been slaves - now freedmen - got one-third of what dey made. Sho' wuz hard times back in dem days, and the houses den wuz made of hew'n logs, wid a door in one side and winder in t'other. Jest plain old [mud?] wuz dabbed in de cracks to keep out de cold and rain. All de cooking wuz did on a great big open fireplace. Dey used pots and ovens to cook in. Coals wuz raked out'en de fireplace and de oven set on 'em; den some coals piled upon top de oven, too. I'se sho' [at some mighty good?] eatings cooked on de open fire.

“In de fields dey raised jest 'bout what dey does now. I'se made a good hand in de wheat fields — I'se been cradling all my life. De cradle has a whole pasel of fingers an hit, and you jest sweep hit along and cut de wheat. De binder comes along and 6 stacks hit up, den de stacks is put in de stocks, atter dat hit's carried to de thrasher. 'Cose, dem times done changed now — fust dey used yoke oxen, den dey used horsepower, and now dey uses engines to pull de machinery.

“My fust memory be when I wuz sent out to 'thin grass' and tote water. Dat's what de little younguns had to do. I'se went to school jest a little, but soon's I'se got big enough to work, den dey sent me to de fields. Time I got fifteen I'se made a good hand, and I been at hit might near ever since. I had brothers and sisters dat helped out on de farm, but soon as dey got big enough to leave dey scattered out and I'se can't give no 'count of 'em now. I had three or fo' sisters, dere names wuz Sally, Emily, and Katie. Had 'bout fo' brothers, too, I think. Les' see; Mike, Nelson, Henry, Mose — dat's right, Adam, dat's makes five. Mike's de oldest, he wuz bawn, I 'specs, 'bout fo'ty-five.”

Jules was more interested in finding out about his pension than he was in relating his life history. At every opportunity he would inquire: “What you spose dey gwine do 'bout us old folks? Looks like time is I'se be hearing something frum dat pension money.” Then reluctantly he would furrow his brow and try hard to recall his early life.

“When I'se wuz 18 years old, I'se had to start paying road tax. I paid dem tax on and on 'til I done got two years past de age 'fore I'se knowed hit. I told Mr. Scafe Gaston and he went and seed Mr. Harper, and he de one dat got me off de tax.”

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“Uncle Jules, did they ever pay you back for the extra money that you had paid?”

“No suh, what dey gwinter do dat fer? Besides, what I done wuz my fault. I shoulda axed 'bout hit.

“When us hands used to be working way down in de bottoms on de farm [?] don't come to de house fer eats. De cook sont hit to us. We had enough to eat most de time — had lots of corn bread, peas or beans, and de like of dat. S'pose no spring was close 'bout whar we'uns worked den dey brought water fer us, too. We had a well at de house — yes'm, dey used a rope wid a bucket tied to one end, like dey still does sometime. Dem boring wells jest come out in de las' few years, we didn't knows noting' of 'em den.

“Yes, I ['specks?] time is better'n dey used to be in some ways. If a person got as much as twenty-five cents a day, dey thought dat wuz a whole lot of money. Trouble now is too many people - two to one to what dey used to be. Why, when I fust comes here, dere wuz no houses a-tall, hardly. Dere's five or six to one house here in Fairmont to what dere wuz when I comes here. So many [folkses?] - don't knows how in de world dey is all gwine to be tooken care of - dey jest gwine here, dere, and ever'wheres.

“I ain't never so much as been out'n de county but one time - dat wuz befo' I married. I 'cided to go to Asheville, so I sot out walking. I jest wanted to go and see a little of de world.

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When I get to Landrum I waited for de gravel train. I wuz aiming to cotch it and ride de rest of de way, but dat train got off de tracks some place down de road and never did come; so I had to walk all de way. I sho' felt like I wuz gitting out'n de world when I got dere. Fust man I seed on de street wuz Mr. Dave Cohen, from 'round where I wuz - he one dem Republicans. Oh, dat's a man dat can lawfully marry people and sign papers and things like 'e dat. He says, 'Jules, what you doing way up here, no way?' I feel kina important like, and I say dat I jus' looking 'round de world a little. I walked on a little piece and stepped in a [restumrent?] and — who does I see? Nobody but Mr. John Mucklerath — he marry one of my mistress' daughters. I told him whar I'se wuz gwine to stay and ever'thing so he could tell my folks back home, in case dey jest wanted to track atter me fer somethin' or n'other.

“Well, I done jest a little of ever'thing while I wuz in Asheville. Fust job I landed wuz in a quarry — dat's whar dey blasted rocks out 'o de ground. I'se got fifty cents a day den, as hired help wuz hard to find. Atter dat, dey put me to cooking fer de men in de camp whar dey slept and et. I stayed up dere in Asheville from August till Christmas eve. I'se wuz kinda gittin' homesick and hit got so cold up dere I'se figgered de bes' thing fer me to do

wuz make my way back home. I got myself all bundled up and went down to de station, but fo' I stopped at a frolic fer a spell. De wind got to blowing — Lawd, how hit blowed."

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Here Uncle Jules rounded his thick lips and made a buzzing sound, imitating the wind. He had heard of people getting snow-bound and this was his main reason - he later admitted - for leaving "so sudden like".

"I said to myself, I says, 'Jules, chile, hit's high time you'se gittin' to dat station'. So's I struck out. Well, when dat train pulled in, it wuz kivered with snow as deep as my hand. Den 'bout time it started to peppering snow all over de place, and wuz I glad to git on de train, never gladder in my life. By de time we got to Spartanburg, de snow wuz two hands high on top of de train, but hit wuz aginning to rain here. Dat jest goes to show you de diff'uns in de [elimate?] of de two places. Us don't have no big snow down here like Asheville folks do. I bet hit's snowing up dare right dis minute.

"T'warn't long atter I came back 'fore I got married. Dat's when my trouble rightly commenced. Ever since den I sho' is had hard times — Lawdy, hit's been something awful. 'Cose, fer de fust twelve or thirteen years we got 'long sorta smooth sailing like. During dis time our chilluns wuz bawn. But atter dat, things got worser and worser.

Nancy, dats my wife's name, she jest got so she wasn't satisfied no place no time. Atter while she got so she wouldn't 'tend to de chilluns and wouldn't do noting a-tall. Jim, here, he'll tell you de same thing. He knows I jest as good to Nancy as I could be to my mammy. He knows I had a hard time."

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Dat's sho' is right, I'se don't like to say hit 'cause she's my mammy", said Jim. "I had to larn to cook and do might nigh everything a woman has to do 'round de house. Po' little Roxie, dat's my sister's name, had to make bread when she had to clamb up in a chair to reach de table. Yes, us all sho' had a hard time; den dere's Joe - he's my brother - who is 'round

two years younger dan me, he went and most lost his mind and we had a awful time wid him.”

“Way hit was wid Nancy,” Jules continued, “atter so long a time she went plumb crazy. She talked 'bout eating jay birds and sich crazy talk. She got so bad dat everybody got scared of her, 'kaise we couldn't tell what might happen. 'Cose I wasn't 'xactly afeared of her, but taint no use taking big chances. One time she got atter some folks'es chillun and run'd hit all over the place; right den and dere we knowed she had to be [sont?] off.

“I'se went to Spartanburg and seed the sheriff, and he got some doctors to 'xamine Nancy, and dey say she sho' wuz crazy. Jest to make deirself 'vinced, though, dey kept her in jail for a day or two. Dey put her in a cell wid a 'nother woman to match and [wee?] what would happen. De other woman wuz not crazy but wuz in jail fer stealing - some jewelry. I think - and she say to Nancy, “What fer you in her?' Den Nancy say, 'What fer you want to know, and more'n dat, what you doing in dis here jail?” The sheriff is listenin' all de time, peepin' through a hole to see how Nancy would act. Nancy grabs the woman and dey tangle up; 11 fust Nancy's on top, den the other woman, up and down, 'round and 'bout. De other woman commences to call fer help and dey had to take Nancy out and put her in one dem solitary cells. Next day dey [sont?] her off to Columbia.

“Oh yes'm, she got better and come back. When I got de word she wuz coming back home, I sont fer her in a buggy. Somebody had seed her on de road headin' fer home, dat's why I sont fer her. When she come home, I say, 'Nancy, I want a little talk wid you'. I wanted to see what kind o' mind she wuz in. So we walked up de road and talked for a spell. I told her I had forty dollars in my pocket, and if she would come home and stay and do like she ought to do, I would give her de money to buy her some new clothes and anything else she wanted to buy with it. But she only say to me dat if I had dat much money I ought to spend it on de chilluns. She say dat the gwine get herself a job cooking some place and den she could buy her own clothes. She say, too, dat she didn't went to fool 'round no home and dat she would come and get her younguns. So Nancy got a job

cooking for a lady dat lives over yonder on de hill. Den one day Nancy comes back home and axes de chilluns what dey 'tends to do. Dey's knows Nancy ain't 'sponsible for her actions, so's dey tell her day gwinna stay wid deir pappy and dat her place is home wid her chilluns.

“Well, Nancy never did come back atter dat, not [e'en?] when she got sick. You know what - dat woman went and married agin, sho' did. Den she went down agin and got past going.

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Roxie sho' stuck by her mammy through all o' her devilishment; she went and waited on her till she died. Den Roxie come back home, but hit wasn't long atter dat Roxie got married and moved off from us for good. She moved up de road 'bout two miles on de Anderson place and she's been thar ever since.”

Jules estimated the time his wife had been dead byu calculating the time that Roxie had waited on her at the different places where she had work and had taken sick. Altogether he figured that it had been about six years since she died. “Uncle Jules” could not, though he tried very hard, recall in order the incidents of his life on the farm or on the mill hill. To the best of his knowledge he had been living around Fairmont Mills about twenty years. When he and his family first moved there, mill help was scarce. They had been on the farm and because “Uncle Jules” was in declining health, and also because they thought that they could make more money in the mill, and would not have to work so hard. A Mr. Gibson and a Mr. Thomas were “white gentlemen” who were instrumental in getting Jim and Joe jobs as pickers in the Fairmont Mill. When Jules became confused, his son Jim, who had been a silent listener, took up the story.

Jim is a very large Negro. He, too, is black, and his head is covered with a mass of kinky hair. He bears little resemblance to his father, if, indeed, Jules is he father. Jules said that he “claimed” his children, but that certain conditions kept him from being certain. Jim has a

marked characteristic of explaining everything he tells by motions of his hands. He goes so far as 13 to get out of his chair to mimic the actions of those about whom he is talking.

“Our farming days wuz hard ones, I'll tell you. “Way back yonder durin' de World War,” Jim began, “my pappy wuz runned out from a white gentleman's house jest 'cause he wouldn't tell a lie for him. You see, dis gentleman had a cow and she went and got out and gits into another white gentleman's crop and jest 'bout et it all up. So he tells my pappy dat if he don't swear dat hit wuz not his cow, but wuz somebody else's cow, dat he will have to move off his place. Dis not all he does, he sets the law on me for not jining the war. He had a son dat jined and he didn't want him to. He claimed dat I'd been dodging hit, but dat ain't so. Dey comes and gets me all right, and puts me in the calaboose. Didn't dey, Pappy? Dat's not the wurse part of it; dey fined us. You see, dere wuz more dan me in hit. 'War dodgers' dat's what dey called us. Den we had to pay a fine of fifty dollars apiece. Atter we'se git out of de jail dey 'xamine us and everything and den the man sends us home to wait for a 'call card' that never come, jest like pappy's old age pension he put/ in fer, hit never come yit, either.”

With his last sentence, he lets out an obstreperous laugh. Jim had been reticent, but now his mood had suddenly changed and he wanted to talk. Jim's temperament is quite different from that of Jules. He smiles almost continuously and keeps his hands and arms in motion all the time he is talking.

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Questioned about his early life, Jim said “I never went very fer in school, 'bout de fo'th grade, I'se specs. You see, since mammy and pappy wuzn't stayin' together, I had to take de part of de woman. I had to help brang up Roxie; den I allus had to be takin' care of Joe, 'kaise his mind wuz bad. I went 'round on de hill and worked fer white folks when I had any spare time. I used to scrub dere floors fer dem, and dey got so dey call me 'de little colored gal'. Dey liked my scrubbing 'kaise I'se git de floors jest as white as snow. Dem when I gits through wid one house, dere allus be somebody waiting for me to go to dere

house and scrub. Fust I puts soap in hot water and lets it melt; den I gits me a bucket of sand and wets it real good and throws it on the floor. Atter dat I po's de hot water on de sand and starts to work. Dat's de bes' way in de world to git a floor clean — hit sho' makes 'em shine. Dey all tells me dat I do's a good job. Some gived me a dime, and some, fifteen cents."

"Jim, I would like to know something about Joe. Where is he now?"

"Well, Joe, he wuz allus 'off' a little bit, but as he got older he got wurse. I allus tried to keep him in and not even let him out in de yard 'kaise white girls wuz afeared of him on 'count of him laughing at dem, but once in a while he gets out anyway, best I could do. One day while I'se at work Joe slips out of de house and goes down to de mill store and as he wuz such a big, strong, and believed-crazy person, all de people runned out 15 and leaves de store wid him. He picks a long meat knife up from de meat block and lays hit across his arm and walks 'round and 'round looking at different things. Mr. Nat Thomas, card room boss, comes up to de picker room and tells me 'bout Joe. I'se runned down to de store to fast as I could, but stopped as I reaches de door and peers through de crack fer I knows Joe has a long knife and I'se didn't want to enrage him. I stands and watches him. He walks over to de radio and turns hit on and walks over and picks up a big bottle of ginger ale. All dis time, I'se watching and thinkin' how to git to him. Somethin' gived me strength, so's I walked to de door and I tells him to lay de knife back on de meat block. He wuz a little slow in doing hit, but final he 'beyed and laid hit down. Den I say, 'Joe, what fer you leave de house?' Den he say, 'Jim, you's ain't mad wid me for leaving, air you? I jest having a little fun.' Den I say, 'Cose not Joe, you ain't did any crime.' I noticed dat Joe had kept dat ginger ale so's I said to Him: 'Joe, lets go out yonder under dat big tree and drink dat ginger ale.'

"Well, we went out and sot down under de big tree and commences to talk, for I knows good and well dat de white folks done gone to town atter de law. If Joe knowed what I did, a pack of hounds couldna cotched him. Hit wuzn't long 'fore I hears a car motor and

I knows right den dat dey's coming atter him. Joe's paying dem no mind when de cars drives up, jest looks at me kinda sad like.

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“Den the police comes and grabs Joe by de arms - two on each side of him - but he's such a powerful man and jest throws 'em off, jest like you could a baby; den he starts to git up and 'fore he does I'se knocks his feets out from under him, den de law nailed him good and mighty. Dey puts him in one of dere cars and carries him to de Spartanburg County Jail where he stays till pappy goes to de judge and gits de permits papers so's dey can send him to Columbia. Dat wuz three years ago. I'se went down to see him jest once since he's been dere. Dat wuz my fust trip to Columbia, too. I'se ain't never been many places, and never did ride on a train. I'se ridden the P. & W., though, and de fust time I rid, hit sho' did scare de fool out'n me. Hit started so quick dat hit slinged me right over de seat; den when hit stopped, it might near broke my nake. De fast is, all de places I'se been is [Campobello?], Greenville, Pelham, Forest City, Gaffney, and Columbia.”

Jim confesses to being superstitious; and he tells of a trip to Spartanburg with his foreman, Mr. Thomas. He and Mr. Thomas were on their way down the road just the other side of Fairmont when a black cat ran in front of the car. He said that he asked Mr. Thomas to turn around and go some other may because a black cat was the sign of certain bad luck. Mr. Thomas just laughed at Jim's warning. When they arrived in Spartanburg, Mr. Thomas became suddenly ill and had to see a doctor. He was having chill after chill. Finally, thinking that he was all right, Mr. Thomas and 17 Jim started back home, but more bad luck struck them. A tire blew out. Jim got out and proceeded to fix the puncture. He hadn't quite finished it, when Mr. Thomas called to him to hurry because he thought that he was going to have another spell. Expressing it in Jim's words: “So's I'se jest throws the patch on hit [ane?] hurries to get Mr. Thomas home. And you knows what, Mr. Thomas wuz in bed sever'l days atter dat. But still dat man don't believe dat black cat wuz 'sponsible fer

our's bad luck, but I sho' do. I 'se allus did know and allus will know dat black cats is bad luck, Yes'm, and I ain't never going to change my mind, either."

At this point Jim looks at the clock on the mantel and remarks that it's about time for him to get down to the mill. He opens the door and says, "I'se sho' hopes dat dey don't do pappy as bad as dey did me 'bout sending me a 'call card' fer going to de war. Do's you think dat he'll ever git dat pension?"

"Of course, he'll get it, but they may be some time getting around to it. You see, there are probably a hundred ahead of him. But I am certain that he will, in the near future. By the way, Jim, if you don't mind telling me, what do you make in the mill? Is it very much more compared with the farm wages that you remember?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Miss, hit sho' did work de life out'n po' old pappy dar on the farm. 'Cose I'se works pretty hard here in de mill, but hit ain't hurt me none. I'se makes $8 some weeks, dat's when I is sont out and don't get in full time. I say 18 hit's better'n living on de farm whar you jas to get up way 'fore day. Here I'se sleep late as I wants to in de morning as I don't has to go to work 'til 2:30 in de evening. I'se specs hit is jest 'bout that time now. Won't you all come back agin and we can have 'nother talk? I'se enjoys talking to nice folks like you all, and I sho' did enjoy de one we jest had." Jim goes down the steps and says, "Come agin, fer I'll be 'specting you," and goes on down to the road, turns around and waves his hand.

The visitor, turning around to see what has happened to "Uncle Jules", finds him fast asleep lying across the bed. What a comfortable figure he presents sprawled upon the bed. He is now silent as a tomb, yet when awake, very spry for his seventy-odd years. He must dreaming a beautiful dream, for a smile is playing on his chubby bearded face. Nothing remains for the visitor to do but to bid him "good-night" in a whispered voice, and close the door upon the scene.